



Put a Pin in it!

Charleston Woos Visitors with Sultry Southern Charms

By Debbie Stone

It's impossible to be immune to the allure of Charleston. The city oozes and drips charm, overwhelming your senses with its intoxicating ambiance, gracious Southern hospitality, colorful history and rich culture. I was prepared to like Charleston before my visit, based purely on the continuous travel pub awards it receives for "America's Prettiest Place," "America's Most Mannered City" and "#1 U.S. City." But I was taken aback

at the school girl infatuation I felt once I got there. To say I was besotted and smitten with the place would be an understatement. My attraction to the atmosphere and environment was instant and magnetic.

Charleston woos visitors with the rustle of Palmetto fronds in the ocean air and the delicious fragrance of Magnolia trees. It's a city set in a garden full of cinnamon crepe

myrtles and Lady Banks rose vines with stately antebellum homes that sit behind wrought iron gates and meticulously tended flower boxes. History seeps from the city's cobblestone streets and the nearly 4,000 pre-Civil War dwellings that are preserved and cherished by local residents.

The best way to get a handle on Charleston's past is to take Bulldog Tours' Charleston Stroll, an

informative and entertaining walking tour, given from the point of view of a local who will make the town's history come alive. Your guide will regale you with stories dating from 1670 through the Civil War or the "War of Northern Aggression," as it is commonly referred to in the South, to the present day. It's an adventure into the past where you'll learn about the events that shaped this fascinating city.



were drawn to Charleston, such as the French and the British, and each brought their cultural traditions along with them when they arrived. There were also pirates and sailors who made their way to this coastal settlement, adding a rough and rogue element to the scene. And due to the slave trade, the Africans were part of this eclectic mix. Landowners at the time viewed the slaves as essential, due to the area's dependence on an agricultural economy – an economy that made Charleston the wealthiest city in the region. Over time, the town became the Sodom and Gomorrah of the South, with a reputation for being “party central.” Today, Charlestonians will tell you that their city is still a lively place that needs no excuse for festivity.

For those who wish to get their dose of local lore via non-ambulatory means, there's the ever-popular, horse-drawn Palmetto Carriage Tour, where you'll clip clop along the main streets, taking in the sights of those “Gone with the Wind” times in bygone style. Among the many buildings of interest in this historical mecca are a number of homes available to tour, such as the Edmonston-Alston House, circa



1825, with incredible views of the Charleston Harbor. It was from this place that General P.T. Beauregard watched the bombardment of Fort Sumter, which signaled the start of the Civil War. An original print of the Ordinance of Secession is among the home's most notable antiques. Another stately residence, the Heyward-Washington House or “Charleston's Revolutionary War House,” was owned by Thomas Heyward Jr., a signer of the

Declaration of Independence, and features a lovely formal garden with plants popular in the late 18th century. One of America's most important neoclassical dwellings is the Nathaniel Russell House. Built in 1808, the home is adorned with elaborate plaster ornamentation and has a stunning free-flying staircase, as well as a joggling board. This uniquely Charleston invention has been a part of Lowcountry life since the early 1800s and can still be seen

Founded as a colony by eight Englishmen who were given the land by Charles II in appreciation for helping him get back on the throne, Charleston was initially dubbed Oyster Point due to being built on an oyster bank. In the early years, fear of Spanish invasion caused residents to build a wall around the city for protection. The medieval fortress-like structure lasted for one hundred years before it was finally taken down. Different groups of people



on porches, piazzas and in gardens around the area. It's similar to a rocking chair, but in the shape of a bench, and was supposedly created for a woman suffering from rheumatism.

Additional historically significant buildings in town include the old Dock Street Theatre, America's First Theatre, the Old Exchange and Provost Dungeon and the Powder Magazine. The latter is the oldest public edifice in the Carolinas and once stored the firepower crucial for defending Charleston. You'll also notice dozens of churches in the city, as well as hear their bells, which explains another one of Charleston's monikers: "The Holy City." On famed Meeting Street, there's St. Michael's Church, the oldest church in Charleston. The ground floor consists of private pews that must be bought by a family to sit within, complete with their own separate door. On the second floor, there are open pews for those of more modest means. St. Phillip's Episcopal Church, on Church Street, has had an active congregation since the founding of Charleston, and the French Huguenot Church, also with an active congregation, has an annual service conducted in French. At the historic Circular Congregation Church, visitors can experience the sounds that define Charleston, including gospel, Gershwin, jazz, Civil War camp songs and light classics in the crowd-pleasing production, "The Sound of Charleston."



If you're a museum-goer, you might want to pop into the Old Slave Mart Museum or the Postal Museum. Make City Hall another one of your stops if only to take a peek inside the council chambers where portraits of famous folks line the walls, including one of George Washington that will make you chuckle upon closer

examination. Spend some time ambling along The Battery, where antique cannons line up and face out to sea, as if ready to defend Charleston at a moment's notice. Created as the first line of the city's defense, The Battery is now a popular riverfront park. Its seawall promenade offers great views of

Fort Sumter, Castle Pinckney and Sullivan's Island Lighthouse, as well as some of the most lavish houses in the entire city. These architectural gems with their massive columns and spacious verandas were built by 18th century plantation owners as summer retreats from the oppressive inland heat. You'll note that a few of





the historic houses have finials on their walls, which are actually the ends of earthquake bolts that run through the building. They were put in after the 1886 earthquake, which destroyed half of downtown Charleston. The bolts are there to keep the house together, ready for the next seismic eruption.

Other homes display the Charleston Single House style of architecture, distinctive for being one-room-wide with the narrow end of the building facing the street. Two-story verandas, called "piazzas" stretch down the long side. Such residences were well-suited to the hot, humid local climate, as they offered welcome cross-ventilation in the days before air conditioning. You'll probably also observe that some of the houses in Charleston are painted a specific shade of blue, called "Haint Blue," to confuse evil spirits or "haints" and keep them at bay. One of the most photographed

streets in town is Rainbow Row, dubbed as such for the exterior pastel colors of the houses. The cotton candy hues are said to have represented the items sold in the ground floor stores and warehouses of the late 1800s style buildings. Pink was for pork, green was for veggies, yellow for grains and blue signified seafood. It's a virtual rainbow that elicits the well-deserved oohs and aahs from the many lookie-loos.

A popular attraction for visitors is





the City Market, the oldest public market in the country. Originally a meat market, the mostly open-air venue is now home to an array of artisans selling unique Lowcountry crafts such as sweetgrass baskets made by the Gullah people, descendants of plantation slaves in South Carolina and Georgia. These beautifully crafted coiled baskets are an example of African cultural heritage transported across the Atlantic by enslaved Africans, who used them during the planting and harvesting of rice and cotton. The craft is handed down from generation to generation

and is usually learned during childhood. It requires enormous patience and creativity, as there are no set patterns, requiring each artist to develop his/her own style. You can watch the Gullah women and men weave the baskets as you walk through the market.

When you've shopped till you dropped and your stomach reminds you that it needs nourishment, you'll be in for a treat. Food takes star billing in Charleston, a city with over 150 restaurants and numerous award-winning chefs. It can be overwhelming, however, when it



comes to narrowing down this unrivaled selection. Just know that you really can't go wrong no matter where you go. Seafood reigns supreme in the Lowcountry, from steam 'em and eat 'em shrimp to Carolina crab prepared a dozen different ways. And if you're an oyster lover, you're in good company, as they are found on practically every menu in one form or another.

Dixie Supply Bakery & Café, a hole-in-the-wall eatery featured in *Southern Living*, is known for its tomato pie, creamy stone ground

grits, bacon bourbon pecan pie and sweet potato cornbread. Charleston Crab House, another favorite dining establishment and watering hole, has been serving local seafood for twenty years. Its Lowcountry shrimp, collard greens, Carolina lump crab cakes, grits and melt-in-your-mouth hush puppies are just a few of the restaurant's popular dishes. Fleet Landing is another favorite. The building it's housed in used to be the home of the Cooper River Ferry before being taken over by the U.S. Navy. In 2003, it became a restaurant with prime waterfront

location, serving shrimp and grits with Andouille sausage, fresh yellowfin tuna, okra fries, seafood gumbo, fried oysters with Southern Comfort BBQ sauce and crispy whole fried Southern flounder with apricot glaze. For your meal's finale, try the key lime pie or decadent white chocolate bread pudding. One of the best meals I had during my stay was at Amen Street Fish & Raw Bar, a casually hip place serving up such specialties as She Crab soup with sherry, pan roasted wreckfish, popcorn rice, shrimp corndogs and fried green tomatoes, along with an

extensive selection of chilled seafood cocktails.

For an overview of Charleston's food scene, I'd recommend taking Bulldog Tours' Savor the Flavors Tour, which will introduce you to the area's varied culinary influences, from Gullah and Native American to French, African and British. You'll walk, talk and taste your way through the city, sampling tasty specialties from local restaurants, markets, bakeries and other culinary landmarks, as your guide explains the evolution of Charleston's cuisine over the past 300-plus years. No need for lunch if you take this tour, as you'll get plenty of goodies to sample along the way. And your sweet tooth will definitely be satisfied, too, with opportunities to try pralines, Charleston Benne wafers and, of course, the proverbial sweet tea that so many Southerners can't live without.

No trip to Charleston is complete without a visit to one of the area's fabled plantations: Middleton Place, Magnolia or Drayton Hall. It's a colonial era Lowcountry experience that gives you a glimpse into the lifestyle of the land barons and their belles. Middleton Place, for example, is home to America's oldest landscaped gardens. Known as one of South Carolina's most enduring icons, these enchanting and graceful gardens or garden "rooms" are laid out with precise symmetry and balance, leading to a climactic view of the well-known Butterfly Lakes and the winding Ashley River beyond. Owner Henry Middleton served as the second President of the First Continental Congress and his son Arthur was a signer of the Declaration of Independence. The main house is a museum of rare family furniture and portraits, while the stable yards are full of craftspeople demonstrating the skills once performed by slaves.

Throughout your stay in this sultry gem of a city, you'll find yourself continually embraced by the hospitality of its residents. Charlestonians are genteel folks who are proud of their history and culture, and they are always more than happy to share it with visitors. And if you ask politely, you might just get them to tell you the secrets of their slow, congenial lifestyle.

If you go:

For all things Charleston, contact the Charleston Area Convention & Visitors Bureau at: 800-774-0006 or www.explorecharleston.com